



The Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness

Chairman Dan Burton (R ~ IN)

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CHAIRMAN BURTON TO EXAMINE THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF MERCURY- CONTAINING DENTAL AMALGAMS

Washington, D.C. – As part of an ongoing investigation into the risks of medical and dental exposure to mercury, the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness will hold a hearing to examine the harmful effects of mercury's discharge from dental offices into municipal sewage systems. The Subcommittee also hopes to learn more about cost-effective measures to mitigate the impact of such mercury waste, and to promote improved public health for all Americans.

Congressman Dan Burton (R-IN), Chairman of the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness, will hold an oversight hearing entitled, **"The Environmental Impact on Mercury-Containing Dental Amalgams," on Wednesday, October 8, 2003, in Room 2154 of the Rayburn House Office Building at 3:00 p.m.**

"Mercury is one of the most toxic minerals found in nature, second only to radioactive materials," stated Chairman Burton. "I believe it was sound public health policy to eliminate mercury from thermometers, blood pressure gauges, cosmetics, light switches, and mining operations. Yet, despite those safety precaution measures, mercury is still widely used by dentists as a restorative material to fill cavities."

Dentistry exposes patients to mercury in two ways: initially, through its direct implantation of amalgam into teeth, and then again during the disposal process by increasing the amount of mercury in the food chain.

Some scientists believe that dental mercury may only be a small percentage of the total National mercury exposure problem; however, dentists remain a significant source of mercury that ultimately finds its way into wastewater treatment plants. The Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies (AMSA) estimates that on average, dentists contribute between 35 percent and 40 percent of the mercury received by publicly owned sewage treatment plants. In fact, in many municipalities dentists are the single largest source of wastewater mercury.

Dental mercury finds its way into wastewater through a variety of means. In a dental office there is excess amalgam left over after each tooth is filled. In a typical filling procedure, the amalgam is sculpted to the shape of a patient's natural teeth, thus creating scraps. Also, old fillings are drilled out, and unhealthy teeth with fillings are extracted. Depending upon whether the dental clinic in question closely follows best-management practices, varying amounts of mercury-containing amalgam from these procedures are washed down the drain.

This process is extremely serious because mercury is highly toxic, and wastewater treatment plants do not have the means to effectively remove the mercury. The AMSA estimates that it costs as much as **\$21 million per pound** to safely remove mercury once it becomes part of the wastewater stream.

In the absence of that \$21 million per pound removal operation, small mercury particles find their way into rivers and streams, and eventually into drinking water, thereby entering the food chain. Heavy particles tend to settle into treatment plant sludge. Ultimately, that sludge either gets incinerated, thus releasing its mercury directly into the atmosphere, or it gets spread out on agricultural fields as a fertilizer. Over time, bacteria then methylate and the mercury on the fields circulates back into the environment.

PANEL ONE WITNESSES:

Mr. Geoffrey Grubbs
Director, Office of Science and Technology
Environmental Protection Agency
Washington, DC

Capt. James Ragain, Jr.
Dental Corps, United States Navy
Great Lakes, IL

PANEL TWO WITNESSES:

Dr. Fredrick Eichmiller
Director, American Dental Association Health Foundation
Paffenbarger Research Center, National Bureau of Standards & Technology
Gaithersburg, MD

Mr. Norman LeBlanc
Chief of Technical Services
Association of Metropolitan Sewage Agencies (AMSA)
Washington, DC

Mr. Peter Berglund, PE
Principal Engineer, Metropolitan Council of Environmental Services
Industrial Waste Section
St. Paul, MN

Mr. David Galvin
Project Manager, Hazardous Waste Management Program
King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks
Water and Land Resources Division
Seattle, WA

This hearing is a follow-up to the Subcommittee's hearing of May 8, 2003, which examined the potential health implications of mercury amalgams in the body. For more information, or to look at previous hearing resource materials, please visit Chairman Burton's designated healthcare section on his website at www.house.gov/burton/healthcare.